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Epiphany 3C
Peace, Seattle
January 27, 2019
Luke 4:14-21

PART 1: THE CONTEXT AND THE MISSION

The place was a boomtown, with more projects being built than anywhere else within 100 miles, and the need for skilled laborers was high.

One craftsman, who lived with his family an hour's walk from the rising city—saw the opportunity and sought to seize it. So with the help of his oldest son/apprentice, he loaded his tools and together they went to offer their services for what was to be the region's new capital: Sepphoris.

Joining scores of other stonemasons and carpenters, plumbers, tile layers, and artists, they rebuilt the city brick by brick, stone by stone, helping it to become what Jewish historian Josephus would later call, "the ornament of Galilee."

In those early decades of the 1st century, Sepphoris was not yet the fine Roman City it would one day be; that would come later. But it was a beautiful city, a wealthy city, and a Jewish one.[1]

The homes rising in Sepphoris during those first years of the new millennium were built for the upper crust, with frescoed rooms and their own private ritual baths—not a small extravagance considering where the water had to be brought from and the kind of technical plumbing required.[2]

But the story of Sepphoris was not always so up-and-coming. Only a few years before, the citizens of Sepphoris had been faced with a difficult decision. Frustrated by years of oppressive rule under King Herod the Great, and with Herod now dead, would they join with Jewish forces and rebel against their Roman overlords, or would they continue to acquiesce to Roman demands?[3]

In the year 4 BC, many of the city's inhabitants chose rebellion, seizing the opportunity to foment disturbances in various parts of Judea and Galilee.
Josephus records what happened next:

> "In Sepphoris also, a city of Galilee, there was one Judas … This man got no small multitude together, and broke open the place where the royal armor was laid up, and armed those about him, and attacked those that were so earnest to gain the dominion."[4]

Judas's rebellion was short-lived, however, for Rome sent the Syrian legate Varus to deal swiftly and severely with the people of Sepphoris. Again, Josephus:

> "Varus sent part of his army... to Galilee … [and their captain] Caius put those that met him to flight, and took the city Sepphoris, and burnt it, and made slaves of its inhabitants."[5]

So, you see, the city that was rising from the ashes of that earlier rebellion; the city that the craftsman Joseph and his son Jesus, traveling from Nazareth, came to rebuild, was a city in search of a new identity. And it was the vision of Herod the Great's son—Herod Antipas—that it become the new fortified capital from which he would reign over Galilee.

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[1] Paul Fredriksen, Boston University, as quoted in FRONTLINE: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/sepphoris.html
[2] Erik Meyers, Duke University, as quoted in FRONTLINE: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/sepphoris.html
[3] https://members.bib-arch.org/biblical-archaeology-review/26/4/16
[4] Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.56 https://members.bib-arch.org/biblical-archaeology-review/26/4/16
[5] Ibid, *The Jewish War* 2.68. https://members.bib-arch.org/biblical-archaeology-review/26/4/16

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Back stories are important. Context is important. And over the next two weeks, as we listen in on the message Jesus delivered to his home congregation in Nazareth and hear how they responded to it, we'll be looking for connections that will help us better understand what happened there.

Today, taking into consideration what we now know about Jesus as the eldest son and likely apprentice to his father Joseph;
… and taking into consideration what we know about Sepphoris—its location near Nazareth, its history of rebellion and destruction, and the new rebuilding project initiated there by Herod Antipas when Jesus was a young man;
… and taking into consideration the bullet points from Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth...
... we begin to get a sense of the complex context in which Jesus takes up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and delivers his sermon.

So here are some of the questions I've carried around with me this week:

- If Jesus worked in Sepphoris, helping to build this new upper class capital from the ashes of the former city, what did he see and hear? What stories caught his ear as he worked beside those with a living memory of the rebellion that failed and the slavery that ensued?
- What did he notice as he journeyed daily between the simple, modest homes in Nazareth, and the elaborate, upper crust enclaves of Sepphoris?
- What was it like for him to lend his skills and bend his back for such a project?
- And how did what he saw & experienced shape what he understood his mission, his calling to be?

Our gospel reading follows on the heels of Jesus' 40-days in the wilderness where he successfully faced down Satan. Jesus didn't go to the desert for himself; he went to seek a vision that would frame the mission he felt compelled by God to lead. And as Jesus leaves the desert full of the Spirit, this vision firmly in hand, he returns to home turf in Galilee to take his ministry public.

By all accounts wherever he goes in those early days, he gets rave reviews.
And then he comes to his hometown. Going to synagogue on Sabbath, he's given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and he takes for the text of his sermon the 61st chapter:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
> God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind;
> to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's Jubilee.

NOW…was this reading from Isaiah the appointed text for that particular Sabbath?

OR, was it chosen by Jesus just for this occasion?

OR was there a mashup of both these elements playing out that morning—engineered by the Holy Spirit?

We don't know. Luke's account is ambiguous. What we DO know is that the people who came to the synagogue that morning are listening; they have, at this point, their ears wide open; because when Jesus gives the scroll back to the attendant and sits down, Luke tells us:

> **THE EYES OF EVERYONE IN THE SYNAGOGUE WERE FIXED ON HIM...**

And into that ripe, that expectant silence Jesus tells them:

> **TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING.**

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We have work to do downstairs after this service, and it's joyful work.

- We'll share a meal together, joined again by sisters and brothers from the Korean congregation;
- We'll be reminded—through pictures, reports and presentations—about goals we've pursued and the ministry we've shared over the past year;
- We'll choose some new leaders;
- We'll offer gratitude for those who've joined the Saints in glory; and we'll give thanks for new friends whom the Spirit is helping to find a home at Peace.

And we'll look forward to where we believe God may be leading us as this new year unfolds.

And underneath all of this we'll be asking a central question, which is:

How will we offer ourselves so that Christ's vision—God's dream—for us, for this neighborhood, and for our world, will be fulfilled in, with, and through are shared mission?

Back stories are important are important in that conversation. Context is important—and this year we're marking 75 years of an evolving context. But finally, it comes down to this:

How TODAY is Christ's vision and God's dream being fulfilled among us?

Amen.